

# Greek mythologies: time and place

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What sort of thing is Greek mythology? It is obviously stories about Greek gods and heroes, stories like the rape of Persephone, or about Minos king of Knossos. They are the sort of things that were written about by the ancient Greeks, and that have inspired later European artists. Perhaps because we first meet them out of their original contexts (in story books, or art galleries) we tend to misunderstand them.

## Real time?

We often make two (related) mistakes in thinking about the subject. First, we think that 'stories' about Greek gods and heroes are somehow like our own fairy stories: Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood. Our fairy stories, though they embody all sorts of social meanings, are not set in real time or in real places. 'Once upon a time, in a faraway land...' Greek myths are different. They were generally set in *real* places, and in a time that could (however tenuously) be related to the present.

We tend to think that stories about Minos, king of Knossos (creator of the labyrinth, and of the first naval empire) are just that, *stories*. Many Greeks did not. For example, when the historian Thucydides (famous for his rigorous attitude to evidence) was trying to argue that the Peloponnesian War was the greatest of all wars, he needed to deal with possible counter-examples to this argument. He claimed that the development of naval power was a precondition for large-scale warfare, and that such naval power had developed only recently. In other words, he did not reject the story that Minos developed a major naval empire, but argued that the empire did not involve major fighting. He did not argue that Minos was a purely 'mythical' figure. He accepted that Minos was a real person, even though it was inconvenient for his case.

The times at which these remote events took place were pinned down by ancient scholars. The major figure in this intellectual process is the late fifth-century scholar Hellanicus of Lesbos, who wrote extensively and systematically on Greek myths. He composed five works which brought together the myths of the Greek world, from stories about the earliest Peloponnesians down to the Trojan War. These works formed a coherent system, with a chronologically consistent narrative. Hellanicus also applied his chronological systematising to more recent periods, fitting local chronologies into his single-spine chronology (e.g. the list of priestesses of Hera at Argos), and writing the first history of Attica.

Hellanicus' work on Attica was taken further in the fourth century by other writers. Their accounts begin with the genealogy of the kings of Athens, starting with the first 'legendary' king Kekrops and including the 'mythical hero' Theseus, linking past and present in a continuous narrative. The outcome of this early scholarship is visible in an inscription known as the Parian Chronicle (after the island of Paros on which it was set up). Its heading runs:

*From all sorts of records and general histories I have recorded the times from the beginning, starting with Kekrops, the first king of Athens, down to the archonship in Paros of [...]yanax, and at Athens of Diognetus' [the year we call 264/3 BC]. The first entry, immediately*

*following the preamble, reads: 'From the time when Kekrops was king of Athens, and the land previously called Aktike (from the indigenous Aktaios) was called Kekropia, 1318 years [i.e. 1581/0 BC].*

In this way, 'mythical' and 'legendary' events from the distant past join the ranks of the 'historical'.

## Real places?

The second type of mistake that we make with Greek myths is to forget that they are generally set in real places – not in some 'never-never land'.

The capture of Persephone by Hades when she was out collecting flowers, took place, according to one tradition (made much of by the Athenians), in the vicinity of Eleusis. Demeter later ordered that a sanctuary be built to her and her daughter Persephone, and the sanctuary was located at the place where the kidnap happened. A cave of Hades just inside the entrance symbolised the entrance to the underworld, and at its mouth was the Mirthless Rock on which Demeter sat weeping when she was searching for Persephone.

The birth of Apollo and Artemis by the goddess Leto, according to some traditions, took place on the island of Delos. The island was famous for its worship of Apollo and Artemis, but north of the sanctuary of Apollo lay a lake mentioned in antiquity as one of the most notable features of the Delian landscape. This region formed the sanctuary of Leto, and marked the spot where she gave birth.

## Local claims

Myths that took place in real time, and in real places, were subject to competition. Local communities laid claim to myths, in order to situate themselves in space and time. There were two main ways of so situating a community. First, particular events of common Greek mythology happened *right here*, and not somewhere else.

Take for example Persephone's capture. The claim by the Athenians that it took place at Eleusis was contested by other communities. It is important that we should not be snooty about these competing claims; instead we should see them as an aspect of local competition within a 'Panhellenic' framework (one which encompassed the whole of Greece). The Sicilians claimed that it happened on Sicily. At Etna in the centre of the island there was said to be a plain rich in flowers, and near it a deep cave, from which Hades emerged to carry off Persephone. He then disappeared into the ground again near Syracuse, and a lake immediately appeared. The Syracusans celebrated a major festival there each year to mark the spot. But the Syracusans were not the only people to contest the Athenian claim. The city of Hierapolis in western Turkey located the spot within its sanctuary of Apollo: the Plutonium (above) had eerie vapours that were said to be deadly to almost anyone who entered. It was thought of as an entrance to the Underworld, and as the place where Persephone was seized by Hades (Pluto).

Or take the birth of Apollo and Artemis. We tend to remem-

ber only the claim that they were born on Delos (a claim touted by touristic websites). But there were others. For example, the great temple of Artemis at Ephesos, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was a source of immense pride to the Ephesians who claimed that it was the source of the worship of Artemis throughout the world. This temple, located outside the city, was sited at the spot where the Ephesians said that Artemis and Apollo had been born.

Such stories are highly competitive, because the claim that a particular, famous event happened right here is particularly strong: not at Eleusis, but on Sicily or at Hierapolis; not on Delos, but at Ephesos. Ultimately, these are claims in which there can only be one winner.

The second way of situating the community was to claim that the place or a festival was founded by a figure known to general Greek mythology. For example, the sculptural group on the east pediment of the temple at Olympia shows the contest between Pelops and Oenomaos. The story was that Oenomaus challenged those who wished to marry his daughter to a chariot race (the prize for the losing suitor being decapitation!) The representation of the myth on the temple, often seen simply as a masterpiece of classical art (which it is), can also be seen as the local representation of a tale, for obvious local reasons: Pelops was hailed as the founder of the Olympic games.

The whole Athenian acropolis is rich in embodiments of these sorts of local myths. The pedimental sculpture on the west end of the Parthenon depicted the contest between Athena and Poseidon for the control of Attika. Poseidon created with a blow of his trident a salt spring on the acropolis, while Athena planted there the first ever olive tree. Athena was judged the victor; Poseidon was aggrieved, but in the end reconciled. In this case, the contest and its outcome left numerous traces on the acropolis. The unique design of the Erechtheion was due to the need to preserve, and highlight, those traces. It included both the mark that Poseidon's trident made and the salt spring that he created, and also the olive tree that Athena planted. When the traveller Pausanias visited the acropolis in the second century A.D., he was shown both the salt spring and the olive tree.

We tend to forget about these local myths, recalling instead only the versions known to most Greeks. But in fact it was these local myths, or local claims to Greek myths, that were of much greater significance in the Greek world. Greek myths, rooted in time and space, were for a millennium a crucial way for communities to express their identities within a wider Greek world.

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